



State of South Carolina
Office of The Lieutenant Governor

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**State's Aging Network Well-prepared to Provide
Information and Assistance to Medicare Beneficiaries**

A historic change in the Medicare program that will help hundreds of thousands of South Carolinians pay for the medicines they need to stay healthy will take effect this coming January. The Lt. Governor's Office on Aging is taking steps now to help seniors prepare for this transition.

President Bush signed legislation authorizing the new program – The Medicare Modernization Act – in 2003. The new benefit was put in place to accomplish three important goals: to save seniors and other Medicare beneficiaries money on the cost of their prescriptions, to provide peace of mind that a catastrophic illness that requires extensive drug treatment won't wipe out a lifetime of savings, and to shift the emphasis on healthcare towards preventive care and away from simply treating diseases after they appear. Those priorities were made clear when U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Mike Leavitt and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Administrator Dr. Mark McClellan - the nation's top Medicare officials - visited South Carolina late last month.

Secretary Leavitt and Dr. McClellan also hosted large public forums during their visit for seniors and their families to come and ask questions about the new benefits. Many more information and training sessions are planned. On July 13, for instance, there will be a training seminar in Columbia conducted by the staff from our new Aging and Disability Information Center pilot project in Aiken. Healthcare and social service professionals from around the state will be attending. And on August 24th, we'll host another session for the public at our annual Summer School of Gerontology at Springmaid Beach. I would strongly encourage anybody who is interested in this issue to attend.

I am excited about helping 600,000 South Carolinians with Medicare insurance make a successful transition to new benefit plans. When Assistant HHS Secretary for Aging Josefina Carbonell accepted my invitation to come to South Carolina and address our state's White House Conference on Aging this past spring she and I spoke at length about the challenges facing our state as we move into the 21st century with a population of seniors that is expected to double to 1.3 million over the next 20 years.

From now until the new prescription benefit takes effect in January, I'll be bringing you a monthly column aimed at providing South Carolinians with the information they need to take advantage of the new coverage. This month, I want to focus on the extra assistance that will be available to individuals on fixed incomes to cover premiums and out-of-pocket expenses.

Last month, the Social Security Administration began sending letters to individuals who may be eligible for the extra help, along with an application (*Application for Help with Medicare Prescription Drug Plan Costs*, Form SSA1020). For some people, sending in that application won't be necessary. For instance, individuals who are covered by both Medicare and Medicaid currently will be enrolled for assistance with the out-of-pocket expenses automatically. They will not need to fill out the application.

If you do need to fill out an application – or if you just aren't sure whether you might qualify for the extra assistance – the most important thing that you can do right now is contact one of our trained I-CARE insurance benefits counselors through your local Senior Center, Area Agency on Aging, or through my office here in Columbia. That number is 1-800-868-9095. I would urge anyone who has questions about the benefits available to them under the new plan to call. You can also contact Medicare at 1-800-MEDICARE (1-800-633-4227) or visit their web site at www.medicare.gov.

Our I-CARE counselors are also working with the Social Security Administration, and hundreds of churches and community organizations around the state to set up enrollment clinics, where anyone can come and get one-on-one assistance filling out their application forms. After the applications are completed, I-CARE workers will ensure that they are sent to the Social Security Administration. SSA is responsible for confirming the information on the application and for determining who is eligible for the extra assistance.

More than 1,100 of these clinics have been scheduled around the state so far. I would urge you contact either your local Aging Office or the Lt. Governor's Office on Aging to find out the time and location of a clinic near you. We want to make certain that all South Carolinians who need the extra assistance get their application in to Social Security on time.

I know that these issues, numbers, coverage limitations and percentages can be confusing. Again, I would strongly encourage anyone with questions about these issues to get in touch with one of our I-CARE counselors, and to think about attending one of the scheduled assistance clinics. We will do everything possible to make certain that with all these new choices, each and every senior in South Carolina who depends on Medicare gets the best coverage available to them.